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The Six Things That Make Stories Go Viral Will Amaze, and Maybe Infuriate, You

When Jonah Berger was a graduate student at Stanford[1], in the early aughts[2], he would make a habit of reading page A2 of the Wall Street Journal, which included a list of the five most-read and the five most-shared articles of the day. "I'd go down to the library and surreptitiously[3] cut out that page," he recalls. "I noticed that what was read and what was shared was often different, and I wondered why that would be."

5   What was it about a piece of content – an article, a picture, a video – that took it from simply interesting to interesting and shareable? What pushes someone not only to read a story but to pass it on? […]

Berger, who is now a professor of marketing at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, worked with another Penn professor, Katherine Milkman, to put his interest in content-sharing to an empirical test. Together, they analyzed just under seven thousand articles that had appeared in the *Times* in 2008 […].

10   Berger and Milkman found that two features predictably determined an article's success: how positive its message was and how much it excited its reader. Articles that evoked[4] some emotion did better than those that evoked none – an article with the headline "BABY POLAR BEAR'S FEEDER DIES" did better than "TEAMS PREPARE FOR THE COURTSHIP OF LEBRON JAMES[5]". But happy emotions ("WIDE-EYED NEW ARRIVALS FALLING IN LOVE WITH THE CITY") outperformed sad ones ("WEB RUMORS TIED TO KOREAN ACTRESS'S

15   SUICIDE").

Just how arousing[6] each emotion was also made a difference. If an article made readers extremely angry or highly anxious – stories about a political scandal or new risk factor for cancer, for example – they became just as likely to share it as they would a feel-good story about a cuddly panda. […]

Amusing stories that had been chosen specifically because they were positive and arousing were shared
20   more frequently than less amusing ones. Anger-inducing stories were shared more than moderate takes[7] on the same events. […] The findings have since been replicated by several independent research teams, who have found that videos that shock or inspire are more likely to be shared on *Facebook* and more likely to gain viral traction[8].

Positivity and arousal go a long way toward explaining the success of Web sites like *Upworthy*, which
25   started in 2012 and is known for using headlines designed to make you laugh, cry, or feel righteous anger

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[1] universitet
[2] *early aughts*: begyndelsen af 00'erne
[3] hemmeligt
[4] fremkaldte
[5] *LeBron James*: (b. 1984) amerikansk basketballspiller
[6] pirrende
[7] *moderate takes*: beherskede fremstillinger
[8] *to gain viral traction*: at sprede sig med stor kraft på internettet

(for example, on the site right now, "A Hilarious Stand-Up Routine About How Commercials for Black People Actually Sound" and "The Struggles of Being a Woman in a Male-Dominated Field Summed Up in a Short Comic"). Even the site's tearjerker[9] content has a positive message: "Watch a Teenager Bring His Class to Tears Just by Saying a Few Words," reads one. […] Its posts are like the infamous cat videos on YouTube – funny, positive, and arousing – but taken to a new level. Still, as Berger points out, "There are lots of cat videos that don't get shared" – and lots of would-be *Upworthys* that never quite make it. So what characterizes the ones that do? […]

First, he told me, you need to create social currency[10] – something that makes people feel that they're not only smart but in the know[11]. "Memes[12] like LOLcats, I think, are a perfect example of social currency, an insider culture or handshake," Berger told me. "Your ability to pass it on and riff on it[13] shows that you understand. It's the ultimate, subtle insider signal: I know without yelling that I know. When your mom sees an LOLcat, she has no idea what it is." When *Upworthy* first started, not everyone knew what it was, and the videos seemed fresh. Now they are being derided as link bait[14] and mocked. Other sites, including the *Washington Post*, are copying their formula.

The presence of a memory-inducing trigger[15] is also important. We share what we're thinking about – and we think about the things we can remember. […] Lists also get shared because of another feature that Berger often finds successful: the promise of practical value. "We see top-ten lists on *Buzzfeed* and the like all the time," he notes. "It allows people to feel like there's a nice packet of useful information that they can share with others." We want to feel smart and for others to perceive us as smart and helpful, so we craft our online image accordingly.

A final predictor[16] of success is the quality of the story itself. "People love stories. The more you see your story as part of a broader narrative, the better," Berger says. Some cat lists are better than others, and some descriptions of crying teenagers are more immediately poignant[17]; the best underlying story, regardless of its trappings[18], will come out on top. […]

"If everyone is perfectly implementing[19] the best headline to pass on, it's not as effective any more," Berger says. "What used to be emotionally arousing simply isn't any longer." Those in search of evidence for this should look no further than *Viralnova.com*, a site that was started just eight months ago and is already the seventh most popular site on the Web, at least as measured by *Facebook* shares. As I type, the lead story on its front page is "Her Little Boy Has No Idea His Mother Is About To Die. What She's Doing About That Is Amazing".

(2014)

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[9] tåreperser
[10] *social currency*: (her) social indforståethed
[11] *in the know*: være indviet
[12] fænomen, som efterlignes, ændres og deles på sociale medier
[13] *riff on it*: (her) kommentere på det
[14] lokkemad
[15] *memory-inducing trigger*: noget, der fremkalder minder
[16] (her) tegn
[17] bevægende
[18] (her) indpakning
[19] *is perfectly implementing*: effektivt publicerer